



Simply Haiku: An E-Journal of Haiku and Related Forms
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Feature: Steve McCarty "Can non-Japanese write real haiku poetry?"

Far from the scene of haiku in English and other languages, allow me to spark a bit of controversy with the above title and not give away my answer too soon with a topic sentence.

In the early 1980s I lived in Matsuyama, the hometown of haiku due to Shiki, where there is a large population of haikuists. Matsuyama is also in Ehime, which has the best winning record of any prefecture in the annual national high school baseball tournaments. Furthermore, Matsuyama has some cosmopolitan educators who speak English. So as a baseball player, poet, and founder of the Japan Association for Language Teaching Matsuyama Chapter, living there was a golden age in my single days.

Later I finished graduate school, specializing in Japan, and became a professor in Kagawa, the prefecture next to Ehime in northern Shikoku island, for 19 years. Just recently I moved from the countryside to Osaka for a change of pace. Since I am originally from Boston, it is like going full circle.

Anyway, continuing in this anecdotal Japanese-style discourse, none other than Prof. Donald Keene of Columbia University came to Matsuyama in the mid-1980s to address a packed auditorium of knowledgeable haiku practitioners. I went over from Kagawa for the chance to be probably the only foreigner listening to the lecturer in Japanese with a New York accent.

Now how can I break it to you that Donald Keene stated that non-Japanese cannot write real haiku? Before getting defensive, perhaps there is some insight here into why he is more famous than you and I are. The vibrations in the auditorium were warm and bubbly, palpable affirmations that Keene had told the audience exactly what they wanted to hear.

My reaction was "speak for yourself," but this does show that the burden is on non-Japanese to prove that our haiku is genuine. The case is very much compromised by most of the English haiku that I have ever seen published except for translations from Japanese. Not having seen haiku in Japanese by other non-Japanese, I can only cite my own experience to counter Keene's assertion, then turn to haiku in English and criteria for valid haiku in any language.

A pinnacle of haiku publishing is the very competitive Asahi Haidan in the newspaper of the same name with a circulation of about eight million. My haiku appeared there in 1983 with a commentary by a well-known elderly haiku authority, praising the vivid natural imagery in the symbolism.

Naturally my haiku were a bit different from what Japanese people would write, and some would identify as real haiku only my most derivative verses that I would not even try to publish. Shiki himself had pushed the bounds of what had hitherto been recognized as haiku, and just about all of my haiku in Japanese have been published.

Let me give an example of what makes a haiku authentic in my view. My haiku appear elsewhere in this issue, so this is just the process. I used to often go to Ritsurin Park in Takamatsu, which University of California Japanologist Allan Grapard from Paris has called his favorite place in Japan. Nearly every season has emblematic vegetation in bloom, along with some unusual species. I particularly identified with the pensive blue herons (aosagi) that would sit so motionless that most tourists probably did not even notice them. I sat for a long time watching one perched in the pine trees and its preening of its feathers came to parallel the purification that was going on inside me. (Of course to write about the latter directly would be a fatal mistake in haiku.) But the moment I finished the haiku and the pen hit the pad the blue heron suddenly took flight.

So one thing that I think makes a real haiku is when the changes in nature reflect deep transformations in oneself. As in the above example, the haiku is not only written but lived, and then the experience is preserved in verse for its representative value.

Considering the audience, however, the poem has to stand alone without any explanation on the strength of its universality. But unlike Western or Indian verses that can be abstract or metaphysical, haiku poetry is characterized by concrete nature symbolism.

The rule that haiku must have a kigo or seasonal reference is thus not an arbitrary hoop to jump through but represents a long tradition of poetic sensibility. This is explained by Hajime Nakamura in the book *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, Tibet, China, and Japan*. Whereas Indian thought is at least as abstract as Western thought, ways of thinking are increasingly concretistic as one goes east to China and most of all in Japan.

It would be a mistake to start with the kigo, though, rather than with one's own experience of nature itself and reflections thereof. For what characterizes haiku most of all is deep meaning or profound insight that is authentic and contextualized in nature.

The customary break in a haiku poem allows for linkage or multidimensionality. Through the universality of the nature symbolism, the reader should provide the final dimension.

That haiku should communicate as well as reflect the mind of the author is one reason for my idea of bilingual haiku: two versions of the same poem that are not translations but haiku in their own right, while also giving bilingual readers more perspective on haiku that may otherwise be more difficult to understand. The English haiku in this journal have Japanese counterparts that were generally written first and have been published in Japan.

The Bilingual Haiku Scroll at <http://www.waoe.org/steve/haiku.html> or http://www.kagawa-jc.ac.jp/~steve_mc/haiku.html is a selection of my haiku divided into seasons, and each with versions in Japanese, English and Romanized for Japanese language learners.

Among the inferences to be made from the above considerations, haiku in English and other languages should aim for depth and authenticity more than a 5-7-5 syllable pattern in English. It would probably be of no use to try and prohibit elementary school teachers from using the term haiku to encourage their pupils to write short poems, but it may help to identify surrounding genre such as senryu, which can be light and humorous yet should also uncover some truth.

So to answer the question of this article: yes, but evidence must still be amassed and advanced so long as the question exists of whether or not non-Japanese can write real haiku. If Donald Keene were a poet he may not have had to pander to proprietary sentiments in that respect. So one key will be to show that haiku represents a number of different genre according to what is poetic and profound in different languages and cultures, but all between earth and sky.

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Steve also has a collection of haiku in this issue of *Simply Haiku* - > Steve's Haiku.